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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT
in the Elementary Schools
of Marshall County

W. F. Kumlien
C. Scandrette
Raymond Hatch



In 1920 there was an average of 33 pupils per rural school teacher



but by 1940 the average enrollment had shrunk to 13 pupils

Each symbol represents 3 pupils

* * * * *

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The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Marshall County

For some years past population experts have been predicting a widespread reduction in elementary school enrollments as a direct result of the marked decline in the birth rate.

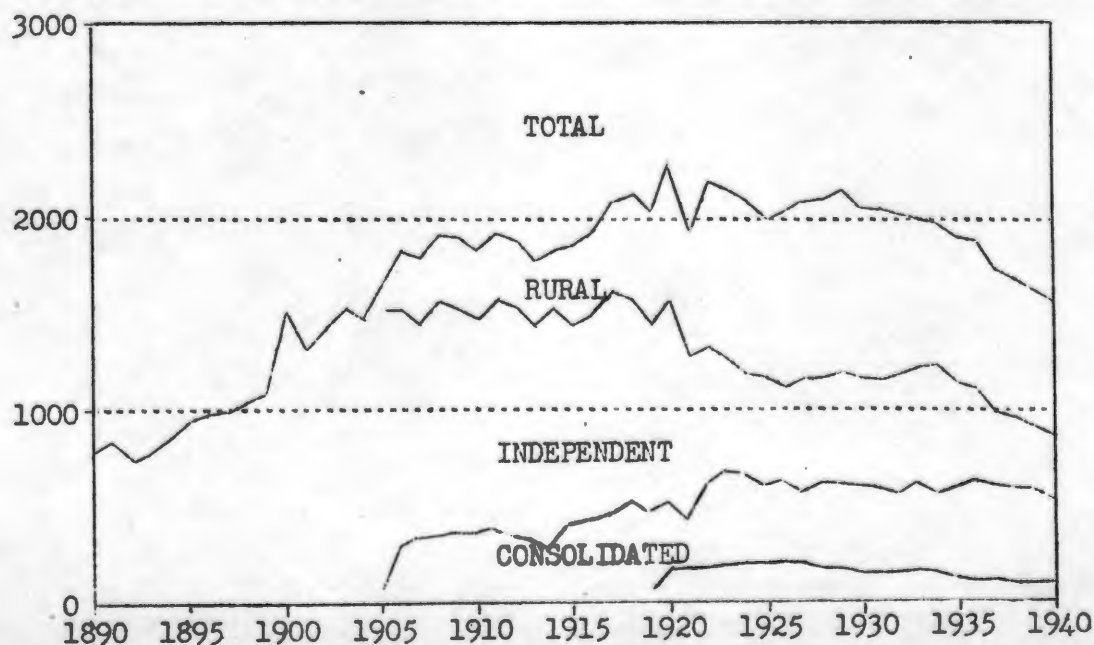
One has but to glance at Figure 1 to realize that elementary enrollments in Marshall county are falling rather rapidly. Although the peak enrollment was reached in 1922*, no definite downward trend was in evidence until after 1929. For each year between 1930 and 1940 total enrollments were lower than for the preceding year, with the net decline during the interval amounting to 25.6 percent. It can be noted that rural enrollments have dropped more rapidly than have the independent and consolidated enrollments.

It seems probable that recent population losses through migration may have accounted for a part of the enrollment decline. During the decade 1930-40, the population of Marshall county experienced a loss in numbers of approximately 7 percent**. Of far greater significance to the enrollment question, however, is the recent trend in the Marshall county birth rate—a trend which follows the same general pattern as that for the state and for the nation as a whole. Between 1925 and 1938 the birth rate fell from 22.9 per thousand of the population to 17.4, a drop of 24 percent. This decline in birth rate seems to offer the only adequate explanation for the decreases noted in elementary enrollments. Since no immediate change in the birth rate trend is likely, and since net gains from immigration promises to be negligible, enrollments will continue to decline. At the present time high school enrollments are just beginning to feel the effects of fewer births, but they will experience greater losses in coming years. The problems which have grown out of declining enrollments are so serious in nature that they cannot be overlooked by any action program which aims at county and community planning.

* The total elementary enrollment in 1922 was 2,178.

** In 1930 Marshall county had a population of 9,540; in 1940, 8,881.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Marshall County, 1890-1940.



Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Figure 2. Elementary Enrollments in Marshall County Districts, 1920, 1930 and 1940.

(4) - - -	(2) 22 21 18	64, 44, 41 Newark Ind.	104 98 79	(1) 17 12 15	(4) 16 16 10	(1) 20 36 7	132 114 80	(1) 50 46 42
(3) Dayton 12 19 --	(1) 16 19 11	13 8 7	Kidder Cons.	White (4) 17 23 13	Victor (3) 23 17 14	(2) 24 22 4	LaBelle	134 168 112 Veblen Ind.
Stena 57 30 19	Miller 55 44 36	(2) 17 14 8 23	Pleasant Valley (4) 18 17 14	(1) 16 12 23	(2) 35 21 11	(1) 24 21 21	68 67 37	McKinley (2) 27 17 11
72 84 42 Weston Cons.	35 32 33 Lowell	66 58 36 Waverly	-- 52 28 Hamilton	19 -- -- Lake City Ind.	23, 50, 52 (3) 43 13 15	59 67 47	Red Iron Lake	57, 41, 37
(3) 22 6 -- Newport	(5) 14 11 8 Hickman	33 74 51 40 Sisseton	11 11 16 Fort	(4-5) 28 32 29 Eden	(6) 40 13 11 Lake View	-- 8 15	37 49 65 Buffalo	
(2) 15 4 10	(1) 11 -- -- Langford Ind.	134 89		40 12 26 Eden Ind.	(1)			

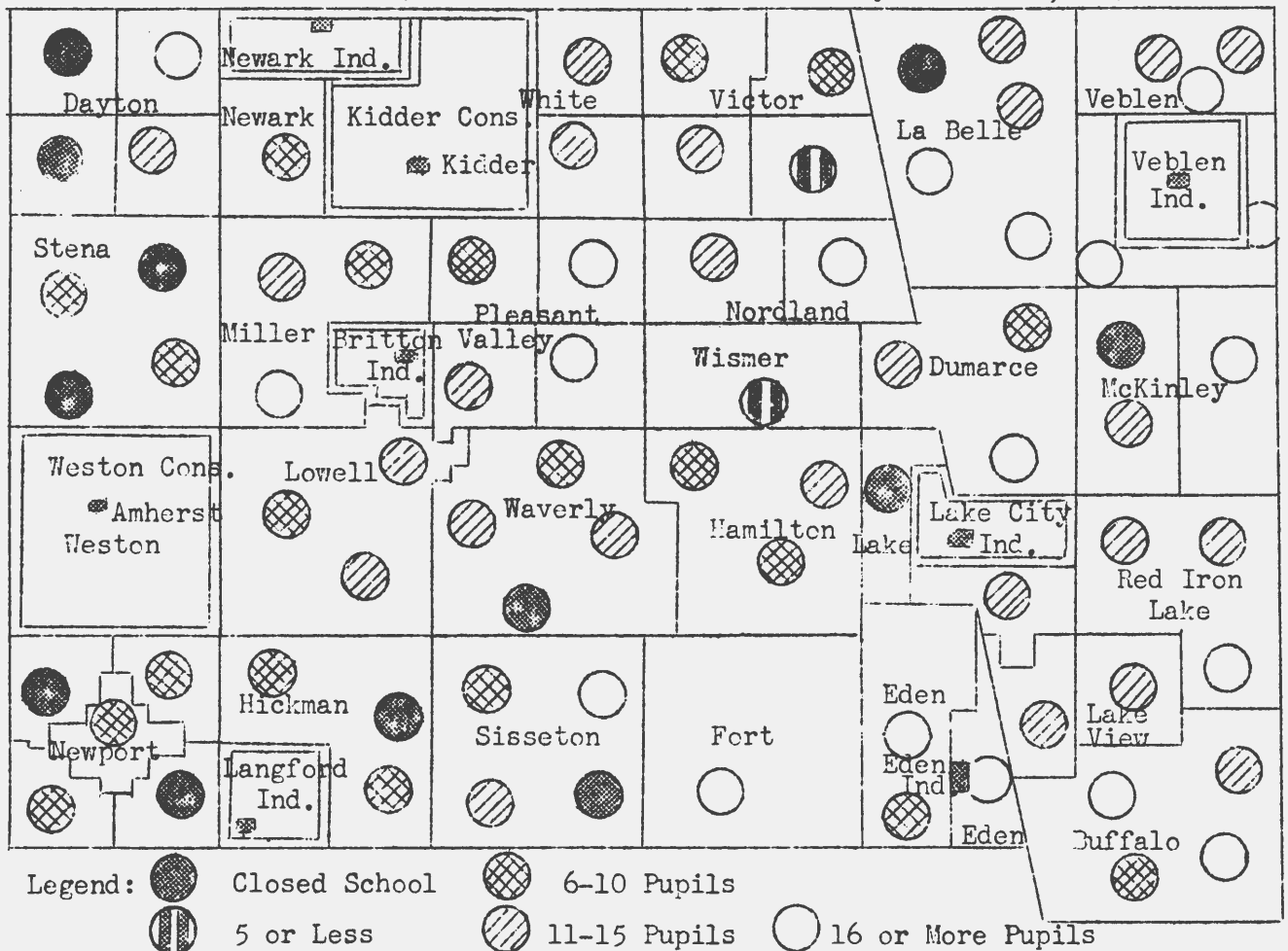
Legend: Top (or first) figure - 1920 enrollment.
Middle figure - 1930 enrollment.
Lower (or last) figure - 1940 enrollment.
Source: Records of Marshall County Superintendent of Schools.

In 1940, 66 elementary schools were operating in 41 common districts in Marshall county. Four additional districts had no schools in operation during that year. There were 6 independent and 2 consolidated districts in towns and villages of the county. Marshall county has no uniform pattern of school district organization, but combines the small district type with the township plan.

Figure 2 shows the elementary enrollment by districts for 1920, 1930, and 1940. A general downward trend can be detected, with the declines being especially pronounced after 1930. That the decline has not been limited to common districts is evident when it is seen that all independent and consolidated districts with one exception (Britton Independent) had lower enrollments in 1940 than in 1920.*

* Schools at Amherst (now Weston Consolidated), Lake City and Newark (the latter two now being independent districts) were still included within common districts in 1920 and their enrollments for that year are listed along with rural open-country schools.

Figure 3. Elementary Enrollment in Marshall County Districts, 1940.

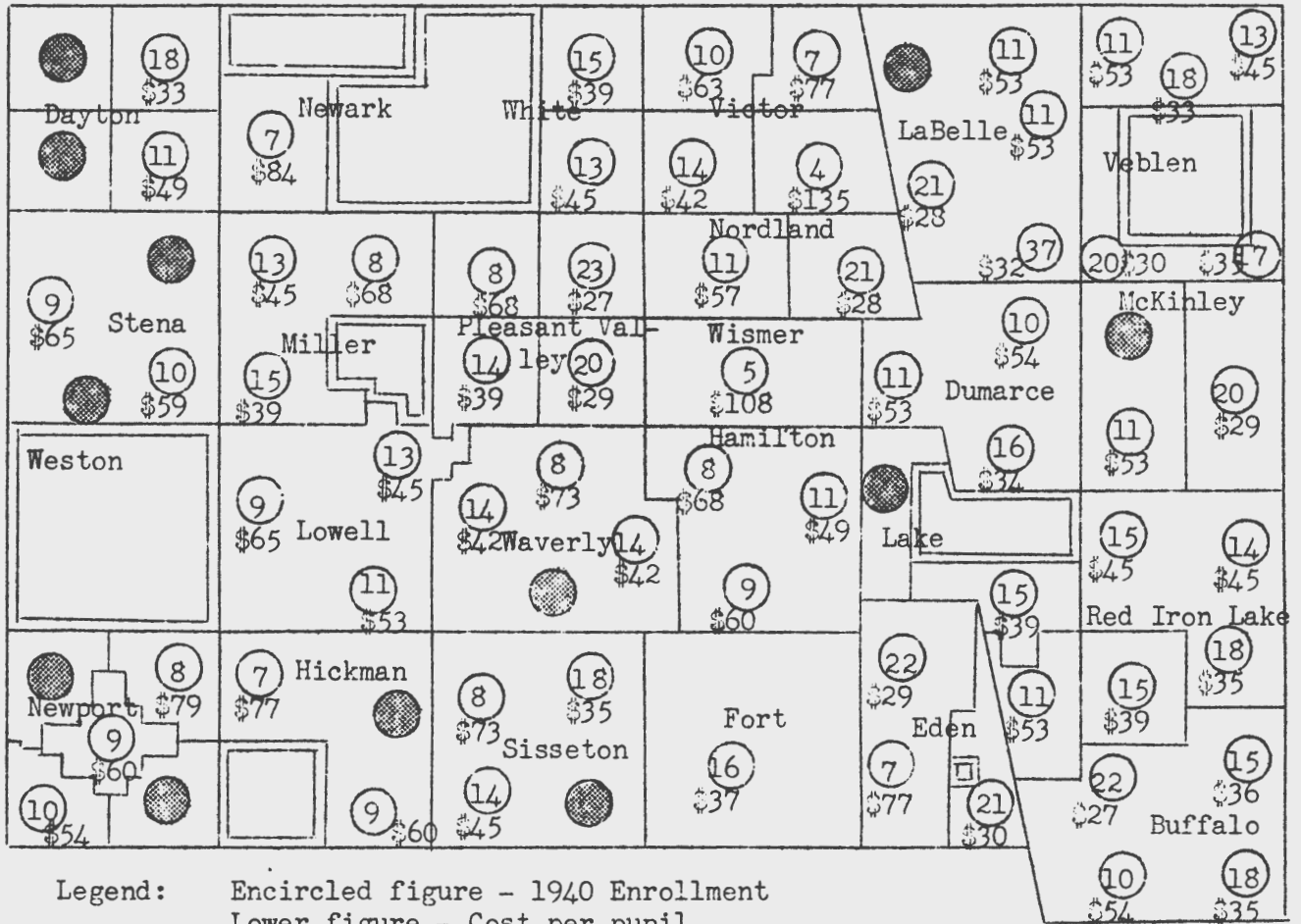


The location of each of the common schools in Marshall county is shown in Figure 3. It will be noted that 12 schools had been closed by 1940. During that year two schools were operating with five or fewer pupils, 20 enrolled 6 to 10 pupils, 26 had 11 to 15 pupils, and 18 had 16 or more pupils.

The average enrollment in the common schools in 1940 was 13.4 pupils. This figure was 59 percent lower than that for 1920 when the common schools enrolled an average of 32.6 pupils. The greatest part of this sizeable decline has occurred since 1930, as the average enrollment during that year was 28.3 pupils. In 1920 over two-thirds of the schools had 16 or more pupils--in 1940 scarcely more than one-fourth of the schools enrolled as many as 16 pupils.

There appears to be a marked concentration of closed schools in the western part of Marshall county, along with a disproportionate share of schools enrolling 10 or fewer pupils. Schools having larger enrollments are found in greatest numbers in the two eastern tiers of townships. A possible explanation is that emigration has been heaviest from the western part of the county.

Figure 4. Enrollment and Cost Per Pupil in Marshall County Schools, 1940*



The instructional cost per pupil in the common schools of Marshall county ranged from \$27 in District Number 1, Pleasant Valley Township, and in School Number 1, Buffalo Township—which schools enrolled 23 and 22 pupils, respectively—to \$135 in District Number 2, Victor Township, with an enrollment of only four pupils.

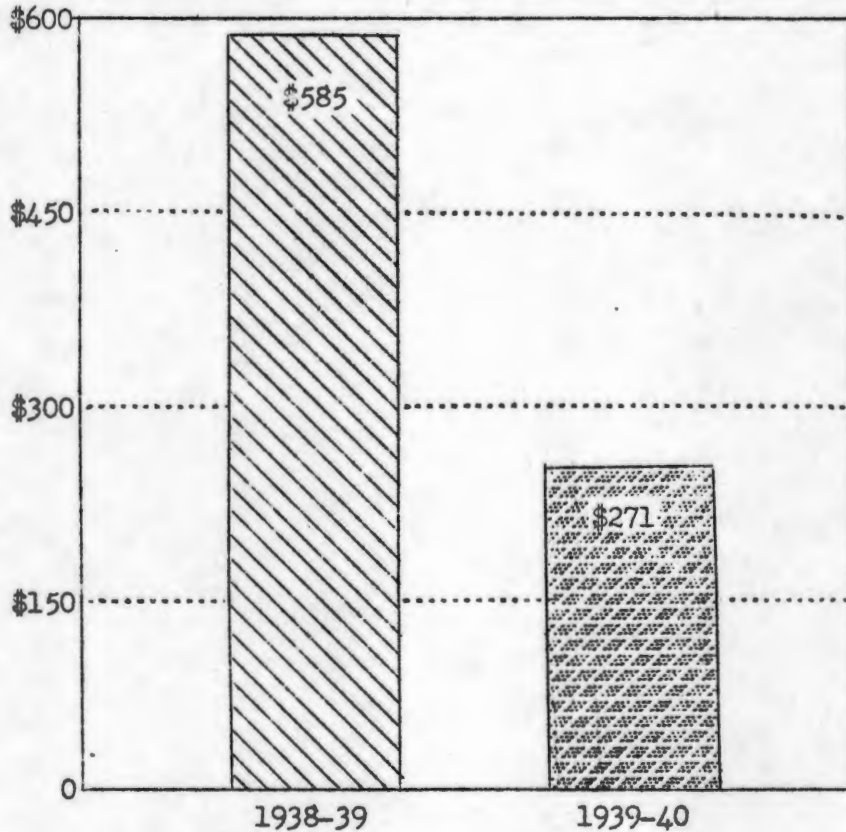
Table 1 shows the per pupil cost for schools grouped according to number of pupils enrolled. It is readily apparent that the smaller the enrollment, the greater is the per pupil cost. Schools which enrolled 16 or more pupils gave instruction to more than twice as many pupils as did schools enrolling 10 or fewer pupils, at a total instructional cost which was lower than that for the smaller schools. The operation of schools for 10 or fewer pupils seems excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis.



Table 1. Average Instructional Cost Per Pupil of Operating Common Schools of Various Sizes in Marshall County, 1940.

Size of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils	Total Cost	Average Cost Per Pupil
Total	66	882	\$38,912.50	\$ 44.12
5 or fewer pupils	2	9	1,080.00	120.00
6 - 10 pupils	20	171	11,250.00	65.79
11 - 15 pupils	26	336	15,222.50	45.31
16 or more pupils	18	366	11,360.00	31.04

* Based on teachers' salaries only.

Figure 5. Costs in Dayton School District Number 3 before and after the Closing of the District School.



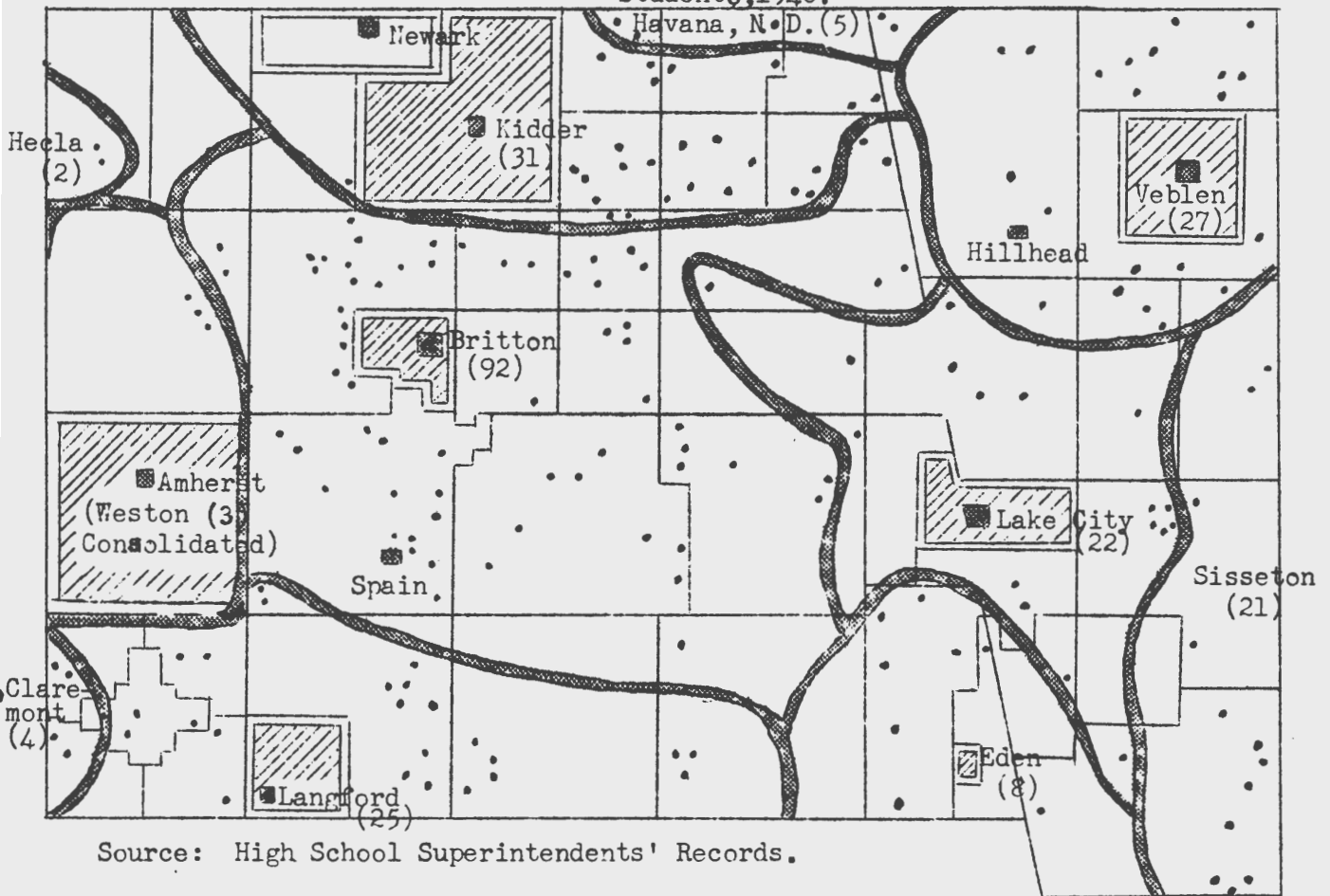
Legend:  Before Closing  After Closing

Source: Record of Marshall County Superintendent of Schools.

During the 1938-39 school term, Dayton School District Number 3 enrolled six pupils at a total instructional cost of \$585. The following year the school was closed and the remaining pupils, two in number, were sent to a school outside the district. Dayton district paid the transportation, tuition and board costs for these two pupils during the 1939-40 term. The total expenditures for that year amounted to \$271. Even on the basis of instructional cost (teacher's salary) alone, and not considering the additional costs of maintaining and operating the school, the net savings to the district totalled \$314.

In general, it seems advisable to close a school when the enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils.

Figure 6. Areas from Which High Schools Drew Their Marshall County Tuition Students, 1940.



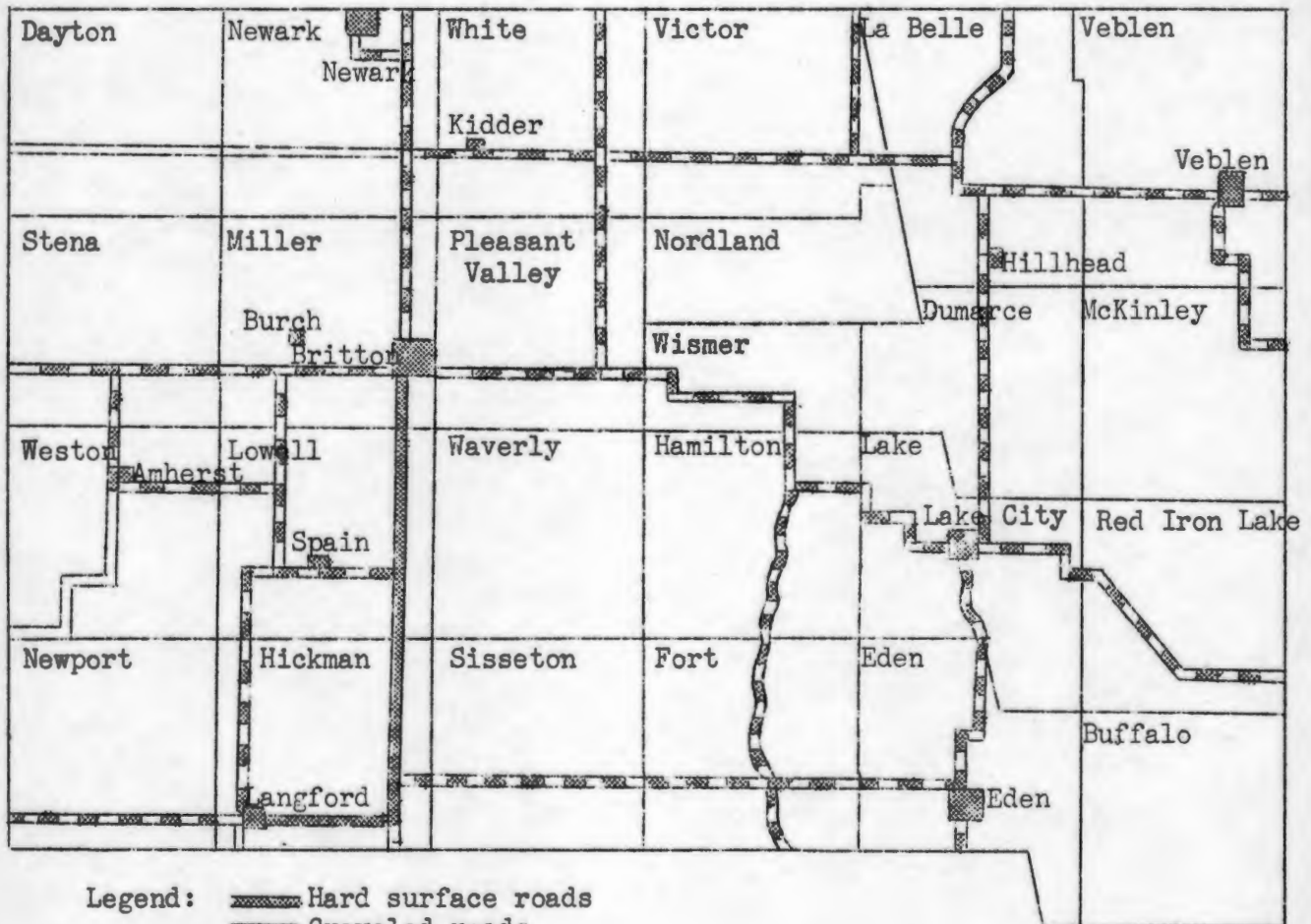
Source: High School Superintendents' Records.

The above map, showing the areas from which high schools draw their tuition students, suggests a possible ultimate solution to the problem of declining elementary enrollments. Since 1921 it has been compulsory for school districts without high schools of their own to pay the tuition costs for pupils living within their boundaries who attend high school in nearby towns and villages. Since the costs of maintaining their own high schools are obviously prohibitive, common districts of Marshall county send nearly 250 tuition students to 11 independent and consolidated high schools in and adjacent to Marshall county.

Why should not the common districts solve their elementary problem in the same manner as they have handled the high school situation? It has been noted that enrollments in certain districts have dropped to the point where the per pupil cost of operating schools has become prohibitive. It may be only a matter of time before many more of the districts will find themselves in similar straits, in which case it will likely prove advantageous to the district to close its schools and send its remaining pupils to a nearby village school, paying transportation and tuition costs. District No. 1, Newport Township, has been doing this for several years. Since the closing of the district school, the elementary pupils have attended school at Langford.

For the immediate future, however, it appears that each of the township districts of Marshall county is large enough to support at least one centrally located school. In this event only those schools should be closed whose enrollments drop below a specified minimum. Pupils from the areas formerly served by these schools can be sent to the centralized district school (or schools), with transportation paid by the board as provided by law. For the one-school districts, particularly those located at some distance from village centers, schools can be closed when the enrollments drop below a minimum, with the remaining pupils sent as tuition students to the nearest common school still in operation.

Figure 7. Marshall County Highway System, 1940.



Legend:
—— Hard surface roads
--- Graveled roads
—— Graded roads

Source: State Highway Commission Map of South Dakota, 1940.

It becomes evident upon inspection of Figure 7 that improved roads are found in every section of Marshall county. The automobile and good roads have made trade centers in the county readily accessible to farmers no matter where they might live. This feature has revolutionized the patterns of neighborhood and community interaction in rural-farm areas.

Many functions formerly performed by open country institutions have been shifted to the village centers. The farmer now goes to the village to buy groceries, clothing, and other necessities; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to participate in social and recreational activities. It has been noted in addition that the farmer now sends his sons and daughters to the village high school. It may be only a matter of time before his younger children will be receiving instruction in elementary schools of these same villages.

Suggestions for Solving the Elementary
School Problem

A schoolboard confronted with the problem of declining enrollments should study its local situation carefully before taking action. The four plans listed below have been tested either in South Dakota or in other states and have been found practical. The first alternative may be applied as a temporary measure until such time as further action is advisable, but the last three suggested plans call for more or less permanent reorganization of the prevailing district system.

Cooperating with nearby rural schools

Keep the present rural district intact, but close the school, or schools, when enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils. Send the remaining pupils to the nearest rural school in which satisfactory arrangements can be made, with the district paying transportation costs when the distance exceeds four miles, and tuition when the school to which the pupils are transported is located outside the home district.

Tuition pupils to town schools

Close the rural school and send the remaining pupils as tuition students to the nearest independent school. This plan besides being less expensive than maintaining several small schools, has the further advantage of giving farm children greater educational opportunities than is possible in the small one-room school. It is essentially the same method which has been successfully used in handling the high school situation.

County-wide district plan

Reorganize the rural school system on a county-wide district basis, giving the county school board authority to discontinue small schools whenever it is advisable, and to determine the location of larger centralized schools within the county.

Consolidation

Incorporate several small districts into a consolidated district, being certain to include an area large enough to insure an adequate number of pupils and a sufficient base for support.